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ABSTRACT

Zen, described as "a way of spiritual enlightenment," is learned by submitting to a discipline. The learner must select a course of study and find a master. The master serves as a role model; he does not impart wisdom but merely creates a ground in which the student can study the discipline and discover his "inner self." Many limitations confront the teacher who wishes to employ the principles of Zen in an American classroom. Vast and pervasive differences exist between American and Asian cultures, many of which are beyond the control of the instructor. Zen methods are a way to infuse an entirely different attitude in a student towards education, a specific subject matter, the instructor, and the self-concept of the student. Zen techniques which can be used in teaching communication to provide a unique, and often revolutionary, starting place for learning include: (1) begin the class with meditation; (2) create in the classroom an atmosphere of calm; (3) give students personal attention; (4) enforce discipline; (5) internalize standards of performance; (6) teach by demonstration; and (7) teach with ritual, humor, and story. (MG)

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ZEN AND THE SPORT OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

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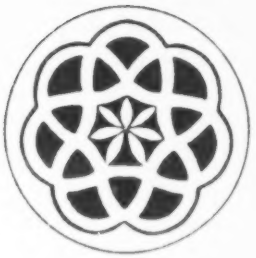

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Zen is a way of life, a philosophical system, or a religion (depending upon how one defines and differentiates those terms) which has exerted tremendous influence on Far Eastern culture and thought. In the past fifty years, this system of thought has made subtle inroads into American culture. Elements of the paradoxical, mystical Zen are seen in such forms as the Jedai Knight training in "the Force" by Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars movies, in the "Tao" series of books that include everything from Wall Street to Winnie the Pooh, and in more serious attempts to grapple with the inexplicable, such as The Tao of Physics. 1 Certainly, much of this metaphorical use of Zen is ephemeral and attractive to popular audiences merely because of its novelty. This "Pop Zen", or "beat Zen" as Humphreys calls it in his book on the introduction of Zen to the West, 2 trivializes the depth and potentiality of a remarkable spiritual force which is in its infancy in the United States. The novelty of Zen will soon, and fortunately, fade. The truth and spiritual insight of Zen will remain, however, to those who seriously seek it. This paper introduces the basic tenets of Zen and illustrates the revolutionary impact it can have on such a mundane activity as teaching communication. For those teaching professionals who were moved by Pirzig's concern for "quality" in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintainence and feel that traditional speech education as practiced in the United States might need

reform, this exploration of the pathway of Zen will provide some useful insight. 3

What Is Zen?

Historically, Zen is a system of thought based on the life and teachings of Buddha, a Sixth Century B.C.E. wise man of India. Buddha's teachings attracted many disciples and spread throughout Eastern Asia. In China, the way of Buddha became expressed as "Ch'an"; in Japan the way became "Zen". Zen may be desribed in a five word phrase: "A way of spiritual enlightenment." By analyzing each element of this phrase, the basic tenets of Zen become clear.

"A": The goal of all life is self-completion. Plants and animals strive to "be fully" what they are--to grow and to multiply. In human terms, this striving for completion is called Truth--to be "true" to one's nature. Man is different from plants and animals in his ability to be aware of himself (insofar as it appears that plants and animals do not have a self-consciousness) and to transcend his biological nature towards a higher (or at least different) "spiritual" nature. This spiritual striving towards a higher nature is variously called religion, philosophy, or insight. Zen is a pathway (the "Tao") to assist people in being complete--to become aware of their true nature, both biological and spiritual, and to learn to live in harmony with that nature. It is only "a" way; there are many ways to the truth, and Zen is but one of them. There are no claims made to exclusivity, authority, or primacy by Zen as a philosophy. It is merely a method tested and refined through many centuries to assist people in their paths to self-knowledge and self-completion.

"Way": Zen is a method, not a content. There are collections of

teachings of masters, but the emphasis of Zen is on practice in daily living. There is no doctrine, priesthood, or heirarchy. All Zen practice exists in communities of believers who develop their own rules and traditions. There are several ways in which Zen is applied. The most rigorous is spiritual training in a monastery. Withdrawn from the world, monks commit themselves to a spartan discipline of meditation, work, and study. People can also pursue less rigorous training in periodic meditation or retreats in Zen centers or monasteries. Another common way to study Zen is through traditional cultural activites which can lead to spiritual insight--painting, flower arranging, fencing, and archery. The purpose of these activites is to provide a medium by which the principles of Zen can be learned and expressed.

"Of": Note that the phrase says that Zen is a way "of" spiritual enlightenment, not a way "to" enlightenment. Zen is not goal directed. In fact, "trying" to find enlightenment is the greatest obstacle to achieving it. The method of Zen entails achieving a "egolessness"--removing elements of ego-striving that impede spiritual enlightenment. To be without ego allows one to commune (to become one) with the Universe and to ultimately find one's "true nature" in that larger reality. Thus, one "tries without trying, strives without striving" to achieve enlightenment ("satori"). Paradoxes such as these are common in Zen literature, since they reflect the paradoxically dual nature of man. The basic tool of Zen method is meditation--training in the ability to concentrate and to attend to the "here and now" of existence. Ego is filled with the activities and striving of the world that keeps one either past-oriented with anger or regret over mistakes he has made or injuries he has suffered, or future-oriented with worry about what might happen or envy over what he would like to gain. To concentrate on the "here and now" shuts out these distactions

and allows one to be in a state of peace with one's nature.

"Spiritual": The spiritual nature of man cannot be divided successfully as it has been attempted in the West into elements of "mind" (psychology), "body" (medicine), and "spirit" (religion). Life is of whole cloth. To separate the elements of life leads to fragmentation and disharmony (or dis-"ease"). The need for Zen emerges from the spiritual longing to be whole and in harmony with the self and others. Spirituality, thus, is a potentiality in man, and Zen is the method for actuating that potential.

"Enlightenment": There are brief moments in human experience when one "sees clearly" the harmonious nature of all things. These moments of transcendence are often associated with the natural world--the awe inspired by mountains, forests, or the sea. Zen respects the completeness of the natural world and provides a means for people to find the same sense of fulfillment in themselves. The discipline of Zen is a way of approaching this level of consciousness. One never "arrives" at this goal or attains a constant state of enlightenment. It must be sought in each moment of one's life--for each moment is a microcosm of eternity. If one's spiritual self longs for enlightenment, however, Zen provides a method for fulfilling that potential.

What Is Zen Training?

Zen is learned by submitting to a discipline. The learner must select a course of study and find a master. The teacher does not impart wisdom but merely creates a ground in which the student can discover his "inner self". Thus, there is a strong sense of fatalism surrounding the culture of Zen--"When the student is ready, the teacher will come." True

to the paradox of effortless effort, Zen cannot be pursued; it will be gradually discovered where least expected. The discipline provides activities which prepare the student for enlightenment by training him in concentration, patience, and attention to detail.

The subject matter through which enlightenment is sought does not matter greatly. Monks are no more spiritual or enlightened than housewives who study flower arrangement. In fact Zen would suggest that monks need the discipline more than housewives--the proof being their attraction to the monastery. The point of study is attention to one's own inner needs and finding a discipline that provides the means for that need to be fulfilled. Common elements of the various disciplines discussed below illustrate the method of Zen.

The role of the master. In any Zen discipline, the master is central and most influential in shaping the student's progress. The master is a role model for the student in the way to study the discipline. The life experience of the master, as expressed in the teaching and feedback he provides to the student, becomes the pathway to enlightenment for the student. Thus, the choice of master is extremely critical. Students should be attracted to the value they see inherent in the teacher. Sensitive to their own inner needs, students select a teacher who can best fulfill those needs. Tremendous respect and authority are given to the master--respect for the wisdom his life experience gives him and authority to invoke the discipline necessary to be egoless in the activity. The master has the great responsibility to "take on" the student's spiritual welfare during the time of training. A student's failure to achieve enlightenment is the teacher's failure. A student's success is proof of the master's skill. Hence, the master does not judge student effort. Rather, he strives to love and accept the student "as is" while still

motivating and instructing him to "become more".

The system of study. Whatever activity is studied, a deliberate and disciplined approach is used in Zen. A calm physical atmosphere for study should be free of distractions and is often even austere in its simplicity. Meditation often begins each training session, and the principles of meditation--restraint, concentration, attention to detail--are a part of the study of the activity. Progress is slow, and patience is demanded--"one who proceeds quickly faces all the more difficulty later." Ritual is a part of most training disciplines since it reinforces respect for tradition and provides a means for concentration. Signals of respect--punctuality, deference to the master, care of materials--also are subtle cues as to the level of a student's spiritual growth.

The place of the student. Since egolessness is a goal, the personality and personal differences of students are not of importance. In fact, personality gets in the way of enlightenment, so it is a "trap" to be avoided. Unlike Western culture, which values "individuality" above all other things, Zen culture attempts to submit the individual to the spiritual discipline of the activity. Enlightenment is not a personal achievement. Rather it is a transcendence beyond individual difference to the commonality of all people and all things. As Pirsig reflected, ". . . how to paint a perfect painting? It is easy. Make yourself perfect and then just paint naturally." 4 Students submit themselves to discipline and deny individual difference because they trust the master to help them to become "more" than they are. Students must provide their own motivation, since the master will not, and they must have confidence and devotion to their own pursuits or they will never have the strength to hold out the course. But, again, perfection is not the

goal of the study--actualizing one's potential, however limited, is the goal. Students are encouraged to do as much as they can, and the techer must be sensitive to the abilities and spiritual levels of each student to know when to use a helpful teaching method.

Zen teaching methods. In the role of model, Zen masters teach by demonstration. Students learn by imitating the model set before them. It is assumed that at the start of a course of study that a student has no "heart" yet for the subject. This "heart" or spiritual sensitivity must be tested and proven over the course of study. Many pitfalls--ego, impatience, poor concentration, lack of confidence--can beset the student, and the master watches closely for signs of these and tests the student's progress along the way. Books or texts are rarely used in Zen study. "Words are barriers"--doing and being are of much greater importance since the learning is a spiritual one rather than just a cognitive one. Frustration is an important part of Zen training. Students must learn to "face the wall" of their own limitation and give the "maximum effort". Once they have grappled with their own shortcomings, then they are ready to experience a breakthrough. Without this total commitment, however, students are never challenged to expand their capabilities. Humor is also an important element. It balances the seriousness of training and often provides a paradoxical solution that a frontal approach to a problem might not have evoked. Likewise, storytelling and epigrams are important tools in Zen training because they are indirect and succinct teaching devices that work on many levels simultaneously. The spiritual insights imbedded in an apt story often provide a much more pointed lesson than any straightforward lecture might. "Talking about truth is not the same thing as being true."

Zen Applications in Teaching Communication

Many limitations confront the teacher who wishes to employ the principles of Zen in an American classroom. Vast and pervasive differences exist between American and Asian cultures, many of which are beyond the control of an instuctor. For example, little can be done to change the motivation level, which is often low among American students, for studying communication. Speech classes are often required and dreaded. Rarely are they sought out as valuable in themselves. Little can be done to change the apriori attitudes that students have towards teachers, who are seen as enforcers of requirements and evaluators of performance. Respect for the position, experience, and authority of the instructor is a foreign concept to most American students. Little can be done about the apriori lack of confidence that most American students have about their skills as communicators. Objectively, communication skills are abysmal in American students generally, yet students resent and resist most attempts at improving those skills. And finally, little can be done about the lack of rigor that most American students bring to their studies. In general, they want quick and easy answers, they have poor critical thinking skills, and they cannot tolerate a moment of frustration or ambiguity in classroom methods.

These limitations are contrary to the very heart of Zen philosophy and training methods. They pose extreme difficulties in trying to adapt Zen methods to an American classroom, but it is possible. More importantly, it is valuable to attempt to graft a new philosophical approach to American education--because the need is there. If there is low motivation, lack of respect, low self-confidence, and little rigor in American classrooms, then there is a definite need to change these limitations that instuctors must confront. Zen methods are a way to infuse

an entirely different attitude in a student towards education, a specific subject matter, the instructor, and the self-concept of the student.

Another compelling reason for considering a Zen approach to communication studies is in the nature of the subject matter. In Zen and the Art of Archery, Herrigel contrasts the notions of "sport" and "art" in the Zen understanding. 5 In Zen, sport is the mechanical repetition of a skill. The goal of a sport is merely to repeat the behavior flawlessly--much as a gymnast repeats a planned routine. Zen art has an entirely different goal--to use the behavior as a way of finding and expressing oneness (wholeness or completeness) with the artistic environment. Thus, a Zen archer does not attempt to "hit the target", instead the process is one of becoming "one with the target". When the archer is one with the bow, one with the arrow, one with the pathway of the arrow, and one with the target, then the arrow hits the target of its own accord--the archer is merely one element in this event. The activity becomes incidental to the deeper process of self-discovery. If you replace "archery" in this example with "communication", you see the immediate applicability of Zen to an "art" of communciation. Is not the study of communication--in its better aspects--but a way of self-discovery, a way of unlocking the potential a student has to communicate effectively? One the other hand, do not our classrooms too often become "gymnasia" of teaching rote behaviors, rote formulas--and even then not very effectively?

If the following dissatisfactions or concerns are yours, you may be interested in experimenting with Zen training methods. The following is a list of Zen (or loose adaptations of Zen) techniques that I have used in communication classes that have provided a unique, and often revolutionary, starting place for learning.

Begin with meditation. Just as meditation ("zazen") is at the heart of all Zen studies, it can be incorporated into the classroom routine very easily. I begin class with five minutes of "relaxation exercises" in which I sit in the front of the room and lead students in progressive relaxation techiques. Gradually this period can be increased to ten or fifteen minutes as students become more skilled and comfortable with it. Once students learn to relax, I encourage them to extend that physical skill to other aspects of their lives--driving in heavy traffic, dealing with difficult people in interpersonal relationships, job interviews, and public speaking performances. I use creative visualization exercises to transplant the physical relaxation created in the opening meditation to these other situations. Students enjoy the chance to relax before class begins (once they overcome the unsettling novelty of it) and find it quite helpful in developing skills in these other communication situations.

Create an atmosphere of calm. In order to develop concentration skills, an atmosphere of calm and order must pervade the learning environment. This is accomplished mainly by the tone the instructor creates in the ritual opening and conducting of the class. I try to give the impression that there is "all the time in the world" by preparing instructional materials in advance, lecturing very little, and spending most time on in-class skill exercises and activities. In general, the philosophy I use is to "do less and accomplish more". By spending more time on principles and insightful learning, student skills become better.

Give students personal attention. I work hard to make each student feel that I am concerned and care for them individually. This sounds nice, but it is an extremely demanding task--both in terms of time and emotional energy. I conduct rapport building exercises at the beginning of each class, learn students names quickly, give individual

feedback when I return assignments, and try to talk to students individually more than as a group. I have found that talking to a mass audience of students about most things is a waste of time. Lectures are best presented in textbooks. Questions and feedback--the integrative aspects of education--are best handled individually. The size of classes and the organization expectation for "mass production teaching" is a considerable challenge to this effort. It is vital to attend to the emotional currents that fill a classroom. The best learning ground is an atmosphere of love and respect--for the student, the subject, and the instructor. I have to constantly remind myself that as a teacher, any lesson must be spoken in an atmosphere of love or it will fall on deaf ears. Now, there's a real challenge.

Enforce discipline. One way to avoid having to entertain students (which is often the unstated objective of high teaching evaluations) or to provide their motivation for them, is just to refuse to do it. It takes courage on the part of an instructor to enforce attendance with roll call, enforce homework reading with daily reading quizzes, enforce participation with "recitation" exercises (calling on individuals for their thoughts on the reading or discussion topics and evaluating their responses), and throwing students out of a class who do not want to learn in the way you want to teach. Paradoxically, when discipline is administered fairly and with a caring attitude, most students respond well to it. By the end of the term, they even begin to see the value of discipline as a principle in other aspects of their lives. The cost of this method, however, is the problem of students who become emotionally disturbed when confronted with disciplinary expectations. It is necessary to learn to recognize these problem cases and counsel them out of your class as soon as possible. They

will learn best in a more permissive environment, and their absence saves you the effort of having to cope with their reactive attitudes toward discipline.

Internalize standards of performance. The most attractive frame of reference for an instructor is that of "coach" or "mentor"—to assist students to reach a goal that both teacher and student want to reach. This is done through such methods as rewarding achievement rather than punishing failure, avoiding judgment by providing unconditional caring and respect, and assuming student mastery rather than subject matter deficiency. The need for evaluation (to give a grade) makes these more attractive teaching environments almost impossible to maintain. The best way to avoid this problem is to set the goal for the class as "awareness of quality" and to let students develop and apply their own criteria for "effectiveness" in every assignment they complete. Thus, after a student speech, I have the speaker perform an immediate "self-critique" of the performance. I then have the rest of the class react to the student and verify or correct the evalautions the student is making. Invariably, students will mention most, if not all, of the major points I would have made in a critique. The pedagogical implications of this activity are clear--students learn a skill best by internalizing the standards for excellent performance. If a student does not understand the evaluative categories by which his performance is measured, then the situation is ripe for learning to occur.

Teach by demonstration. I can demand no more from a student than what I am willing to do myself. Thus, if I want excellence in public speaking, I must demonstrate excellence in the way I speak. If I want sensitivity to communication style differences, I must demonstrate that sensitivity. This commitment to quality puts the instructor in the

spotlight. Each teaching act will be measured against the highest standards. If an instructor is willing to attempt (not necessarily to achieve, remember) this excellence, students will respond in kind. Any laziness, second-best attempts, or mediocrity in instructor performance is met by the same in students. While student evaluation of instructor performance is useful, an over-attention to it (a constant "how-am-I-doing?" self-consciousness) undermines the confidence an instructor should exhibit. Student evaluations should be conducted as a part of the concluding ritual of a class.

Teach with ritual, humor, and story. Rituals are a way of paying homage to tradition. I arrive early and precede each class meeting with a ritual "cleaning ceremony"--straightening the chairs, erasing the blackboard thoroughly, disposing of trash left in the room, and arranging any visual aids materials I will use for that class. I start each class with little rapport rituals--personal greetings, small talk, exchanging stories about how the day has gone. Meditation is the opening ritual of the class, and I use a small bell to signal when that activity is completed. Any assignment or activity can have ritual trappings attached to it to emphasize the structure and discipline inherent. While over-ritualizing should be avoided because it becomes meaningless, a certain amount of ritual demonstrates attention to detail and concentration ("mindfulness" in the Zen tradition). Ritual also adds a measure of gravity to the learning process that helps students to concentrate seriously.

Lest the class become too grave, I also attempt to incorporate as much humor as possible into my teaching style. Once the ground rules of discipline are understood and accepted, then lapses of decorum become all

the more appropriate and insightful. The best teacher is one who knows his own limitations and foibles yet is willing to work with them (or in spite of them) to strive for excellence. Self-deprecating humor demonstrates the common humanity that both students and instructors share, and a sense of humor in students about themselves relieves tension and makes self-evauation all the more easy to do.

Finally, stories are a delightful and very effective way of teaching indirectly and subtly. I tell personal stories wherever possible to illustrate teaching points, and I encourage story telling in students as a communication skill. We have "story-telling" rituals to start some classes, and I include a story-telling assignment in most classes. Students remember stories far longer than any lecture or discussion I might conduct, so the effort to find, retain, and use good teaching stories is well worth the trouble.

Conclusion

From this discussion, you see the obvious, difficult challenges facing an instructor who wishes to employ Zen teaching methods in an American classroom. Perhaps this discussion is merely a relfection of my own dissatisfactions and limitations as an instructor and an attempt to find solutions. If the concerns raised here or the needs expressed have rung true to you, however, I encourage you to begin experimentation--perhaps in small ways at first--with the philosophy and methods I have discussed. I advise you not to "give the game away" by explaining to a class in advance what you are attempting to do. Telling a class that "I am going to conduct this class like a Zen master would" only creates another barrier. Just do it. Once you have tried it, then discuss whether it worked and how it might be improved. These methods will work, but only if

they flow from your own sense of comfort and confidence.

"When the student achieved enlightenment, he realized that his teacher had taught him everything—and nothing!"

Footnotes

1 See Bennett W. Goodspeed, Tao Jones Average: A Guide to Whole-Brained Investing (New York: Penguin, 1984); Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh (New York: Dutton, 1982); and Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1983).

2 Christman Humphreys, A Western Approach to Zen (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1971), p. 16.

3 See Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values (New York: Morrow, 1974).

4 Pirsig, p. 325.

5 See Eugen Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Archery (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

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